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Companions in Love:

Iris Murdoch on Attunement in the Condition of Moral Realism¹

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Abstract: Iris Murdoch both argues that perceptual experience itself can be evaluatively significant, and that the best way of making sense of this claim is to say that experience is shaped by the *concepts* that subjects possess and deploy as situated historical agents with a stance upon the world. This paper examines the implications of Murdoch's distinctive conception of moral perception as a form of 'vision' revelatory of value for recent companions in guilt arguments for moral objectivism from thick evaluative concepts and speech act theory. I question the underlying motivation for holding that conventional norms that pertain to speech are themselves *moral* norms in developing a metaethical view of moral value (see Cuneo, 2014). Instead, I argue that there is an essentially relational dimension to realistic and continuous self-cultivation in concept application that is helpfully understood in terms of virtue. This, if I am right, brings into view a new perspective on the so-called companions in guilt strategy in metaethics.

1. Introduction

As is well known, G.E. Moore held that the thin moral property of intrinsic goodness is neither reducible to, nor constituted by, natural properties, but that it supervenes or is determined by natural properties, and that we know which things are intrinsically good by means of intuition. To many philosophers, R.M. Hare and Bernard Williams included (who both hold that thin evaluative concepts such as *good* are not 'world-guided') this is too extravagant. Error-theorists such as John Mackie grant the objective purport of judgement involving moral concepts at the surface grammar of language but deny the objective world-involvement of such judgements on the grounds that it is doubtful whether any scientifically respectable view of the world can allow properties other than natural ones. On this view, moral judgements are systematically false because the world simply cannot be the way the semantics of moral discourse would have us think. Other moral irrealist positions include emotivist and expressivist strategies of transforming the age-old philosophical project of accounting for the putative world-guidedness of moral thought into a research program of examining and re-evaluating the *practical* commitments and evaluative practices between speakers involved in moral discourse. On this view, moral judgements do not have as their function the cognitive function of representing the world (in which case the metaphysical sceptical concern about systematic "error" is also dissolved; for more on this understanding of expressivism, see Schroeder 2008). Thus,

Hare sought to make progress with the familiar qualms about Moore's non-naturalism about thin evaluative and deontic concepts such as *good* and *right* by drawing a distinction between descriptive and evaluative predicates such that the content of judgements involving thin moral terms is found, not in their extension (which is held to be empty), but in the functional role they play in expressing our belief about the desirability of doing certain actions and not others. Neo-Aristotelians such as Philippa Foot, by contrast, sought to make progress by reversing the order of explanation or analysis between general and specific value-terms.² Foot argues that thin evaluative concepts should be understood in terms of substantive value-terms, the "thick" ones such as *cruel* and *kind*, where judgements involving the latter type of is seen as inherently evaluative that, if we want to say so, pick out "first-order" moral properties.

While the general idea of being attuned to one's environment thanks to the *thick evaluative concepts* used has been much discussed in the literature, in this paper I instead focus on Murdoch's distinctive claim that one's *conceptions* of these concepts decisively influence what we see. My aim is to show that we owe many of the distinctive aspects of her narrative approach to the analytic origin of a descriptive rather than prescriptive methodology of ordinary language philosophy found in Iris Murdoch's work, in a way that poses no threat to the idea of objectivity in ethics or the metaphysics of values.

Contemporary use of the so-called companions in guilt strategy in metaethics typically proceeds by identifying a specific "innocent" target domain of philosophical inquiry as a dialectical companion that, if successful, could defuse the perceived threat posed by the moral irrealist. Prominent candidates in the literature include epistemology, mathematics, aesthetics, prudence. The use of companions in guilt arguments in metaethics has also seen a renewed interest in the normative dimension of speech and speaking and, indeed, the very concept of normativity itself. Thus, for example, while Terrence Cuneo (2007) is commonly cited as one of the first philosophers to develop the epistemic companions in guilt argument against the error theory, the target companion of Cuneo's (2014) *Speech and Morality* is illocutionary speech acts associated with the linguistic philosophy of J.L. Austin and Paul Grice.

While I believe these authors are right to draw attention to the existence of assumptions and argument forms that are shared between different areas of inquiry at a highly general level, my aim in this essay is to show that the companions in guilt strategy for moral objectivism can only fully be appreciated in the context of broader metaphysical and semantic lessons about concept application.³ Taking my lead from Murdoch, I argue

that there is an essentially relational dimension to realistic and continuous self-cultivation in concept application that is helpfully understood in terms of virtue. This, if I am right, brings into view a new perspective on the so-called companions in guilt strategy from speech acts in as much as the new argument calls into question what taking *language* seriously as an analytic tool in metaethics might in general be taken to be.

2. Preliminaries and The Way Ahead

In her remarkable 1956 symposium piece ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’ for the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Murdoch (1956) questions the very terms upon which the argument between Hare and Foot has been premised in a way that calls forth another category that is precluded by the traditional dichotomy between fact and value, between objective and subjective. With a focus on Hare, Murdoch aims to elucidate just why the disputants have gone wrong, which is so much more satisfying than the simple demonstration that they are wrong. Her central claim is that moral disagreement can stem from a difference in *worldview*, questioning the very conceptual foundations of a given moral outlook, a vision of the actual world that shapes precisely what one takes to be salient and not in moral disagreement. Crucially, worldviews are *comprehensive* outlooks on reality, an unruly mix of evaluative and non-evaluative claims in complex interaction as a whole.⁴

Hare’s disagreement with Neo-Aristotelianism is complex but the feature that Murdoch singles out as the most fundamental is his position that a “conceptual apparatus” is something that one adopts, and that adopting such an apparatus is distinguishable in principle from adopting a moral view, thus construed as a system of moral principles. Hare’s (1965) view of morality involves a Kantian-like notion of universalisability applied to some prescriptive standard that we hold in a way that allows the speaker to *choose* her own standards, so long as we are prepared to hold it for everyone in principle. Such universalised standards serve as a basis for prescriptive statements of the form “x is good” (translated as “do or choose x”). Foot’s attack on Hare is that a judgement cannot be identified as a moral judgement simply on the basis of formal characteristics such as universalisability and prescriptivity. Instead, she holds goodness to be tied to human flourishing; what is common to moral evaluations is simply that all good things are ‘of the kind to perform their function well’; as she argues in Foot (1972), moral evaluations are “hypothetical” in the sense that they serve an end (human flourishing) and will not be considered as reason-giving by those who do not share this end). Using Murdoch’s conception of ethical vision as (all-encompassing) *worldview*, we can explain the difficulty

as follows. Because fundamental moral disagreements may be more a matter of differences in structure of competing visions, one party cannot even see how the other ‘goes on’ to apply the term in question to new cases, or what might be the point of doing so.

In what follows, I examine the implications of Murdoch’s position for two recent trends in meta-ethics. I start (Section 3) by reviewing the renewed interest in the non-reductive cognitivist conception of thick evaluative concepts such as *graceful* or *garish* as non-evaluatively shapeless with respect to the lower-level properties that ground them. The second, which I return to in Section 5 below, is the preoccupation with arguments in the philosophy of language as applied to meta-ethics. These two trends are not unconnected. The revival of the non-reductive conception of the thick seems to have gained fuel from arguments in the philosophy of language, notably the rule-following argument and debates over semantic contextualism. (A similar trend is also visible in the contemporary discussions of the companions in guilt arguments in metaethics more generally.) As we shall see (Section 4), Murdoch’s account of morality effects an important critique of some of the historical precursors of recent companions in guilt arguments from thick evaluative concepts. More specifically, Cora Diamond (1988) notes that Murdoch’s views on concepts in moral perception ‘contain an important criticism of moral philosophers who *think* of themselves as attending to our moral language (Diamond: 1988: 263).

The upshot of this discussion (Section 4) raises the explanatory desiderata for Section 5: how to understand Murdoch’s difficult claim that agents with dissimilar worldviews “see different worlds”. In developing Murdoch’s distinctive attention to language in accounting for moral life, I argue that there is an essentially relational dimension to realistic and continuous self-cultivation concept application that is helpfully understood in terms of virtue. I also show that my notion of *attunement* in concept application is supported by Murdoch’s account of love in moral attention to the reality of the *particular* historical other (in a way that goes beyond the familiar Neo-Aristotelian framing of virtue in moral vision as correctly appraising what salient general concepts are operative in the situation at hand, according to which the virtuous person sees the circumstances differently to how a non-virtuous person would McDowell 1998; for internal Neo-Aristotelian criticisms of McDowell on this point, see Setiya 2013).

I end (Section 6), with discussion of some meta-philosophical implications of the resulting view in understanding the role played by discourse in understanding normativity.

3. From Thick Evaluative Concepts to Murdoch's Vision

Murdoch argues that perceptual experience itself can be world-involving and evaluatively significant, and that the best way of making sense of this claim is to say that experience is shaped by the *concepts* that subjects possess and deploy as situated historical agents with a stance upon the world. Scepticism about world-involving views of value experience as a form of discernment is often motivated by worries that directly connect with the concerns with Moore's position with which we started, most famously articulated in Mackie's (1977) and Christine Korsgaard's (1983) respective arguments to the effect that the only *real* moral realist there ever was in the history of philosophy is Plato. (Since Plato is allegedly the only metaethicist who has ever understood what moral realism would have to be like for it to discharge its explanatory obligations.) Platonist moral realism postulates a structure of the world that is non-perspectival and inherently evaluative:

- a) It is non-perspectival in that it is not particularly attuned to our human perspective and its peculiarities.
- b) It is inherently evaluative in that cognitive contact with that reality is inherently motivational for a fully rational agent. (Note that this also partly explains the ancient conception of virtue *as* knowledge.)

While error theorists like Mackie are sometimes said to be nihilists, I will assume that it can be agreed on all hands that scepticism about absolute, non-perspectival, value representations *need not* imply a global form of value scepticism: it can instead be relativized to some of our inherited ideas, notably the kinds of commitment that Platonism exemplifies. That leaves the door open for a positive account of other values that do not depend, directly, on a *Platonic* form of vindication. One popular such strategy in the history of moral philosophy is Neo-Aristotelianism, notably John McDowell's dispositional account of value on a par with secondary qualities (McDowell, 1979; see also McDowell, 1996, Other positive "subjective realist" accounts of value worth mentioning at this juncture are Williams' (1979) internal realism, which fuels much of the recent turn to thick evaluative concepts in metatethics, and David Wiggins' (1989) conceptual realism.

Thick evaluative concepts thus occupy centre stage in metaethics due to what has been claimed follows from them. Williams' notion of thick evaluative concepts as 'world

guided' turns on considerations about competence with thick concepts within a shared social practice. Many authors engaged in the contemporary debate about the thick have seized on this aspect of Williams' account and further hold the view that thick evaluative concepts are *shapeless* and *exhaustive* with respect to the non-evaluative features that ground them. On this view, sometimes referred to as non-reductive moral realism, for any thick evaluative concept, there need not be any corresponding non-evaluative categorization or kind that unifies all and only the things that fall under that concept from one case of application to the next. Rather, what unifies all and only the instances of the concept (*viz.* kind), or what constitutes the real similarity shared by all its instances, is evaluative. This thesis is often supported by appeal to considerations about linguistic competence: the nature of the quality picked out by some thick evaluative concept is not determinable without using the concept in question; it is not independently discernible. What thus emerges is a conception of thick concepts as playing a dual role in our thinking: Thick evaluative concepts trace out significant patterns in a nonetheless objective reality and at once guide action (broadly construed) in a way that is bound up with appropriately developed moral sensibilities.

Now, one complication with such companions in guilt arguments for value objectivism is that their plausibility turns crucially on what is meant by raising the question in one's understanding of the very subject matter of 'morality' and 'moral philosophy' and the relevant standard of 'objectivity' (see Campbell, 2017). It seems plausible that there are conventional norms of conversation, implicitly or explicitly recognised rights, responsibilities, and obligations associated with being a speaker-hearer within the very institution of speech, norms to which the conversational partners can hold each other responsible. While some authors have argued that these conventional norms that pertain to speech are themselves moral norms in developing a metaethical view of moral value as such (see Cuneo 2014), or that linguistic competence is itself a moral competence (see Cray 2007), I will instead use Murdoch's account of self-cultivation in concept application to reappraise a relational concept of *attunement* in the condition of moral realism.

According to Murdoch's notion of moral vision, when people disagree about moral questions, their disagreements do not partition cleanly into evaluative and non-evaluative categories in the first place; it is rather that the disputants' different *worldviews* generate conflicting narratives about the situation. Thus, while Hare and others present morality as primarily a matter of *choice*, and treat moral *disagreement* as a matter of difference in the ways in which people 'choose' among alternatives, Murdoch advocates a shift in

focus from the concept of ‘choice’ to the concept of ‘vision’: a person’s conception of salient concepts may restrict, or enlarge (and may focus in one way or another) the range of *options* that she is in a position to recognise as available for her to choose from. Thus, Murdoch wants to deny that the person ‘chooses his reasons in terms of, and after surveying, the ordinary facts which lie open to everyone’ (Murdoch, *IP* in *Existentialists and Mystics* 1997: 327). So how does this relate to some of the more recent precursors of companions in guilt arguments from moral language alluded to earlier?

Let us take stock. Williams sought to make progress with Moore’s non-naturalism about thin concepts, such as that of intrinsic goodness (the extension of which Williams holds to be empty). Contrasting thin and thick evaluative concepts, Williams maintains that *thick* evaluative concepts are “world-guided”, in as much as the thoughts and judgements expressed by utterances involving terms such as ‘elegant’, ‘garish’, ‘integrity’ are candidates for truth and falsity. At the same time thick evaluative concepts are also held to be “action-guiding”, in the sense that, as Williams puts it, ‘they are characteristically related to reasons for action. If a concept of this kind applies, this often provides someone with a reason for action’. (1979: 140. Williams’ caveat about “typicality” thick evaluative concepts’ being action-guiding is arguably due to his reasons internalism. On this reading, a given thick evaluative concept provides reasons only for those who endorse it (the value it may be used to ascribe) as part of one’s “insider” evaluative outlook and actual motivational set.

To bring this point into sharper focus, I will, in what follows, concentrate on the ‘anti-naturalistic’ attitude implicit in Mackie’s (1977: 67-77) discussion of John Searle’s attempt at bridging the gap between facts and values. Searle argues for the reconciliation of a special class of evaluative and interest-involving facts, ‘institutional’ facts, as opposed to ‘brute’ facts. Searle’s distinction between institutional and brute facts is reminiscent of Williams’ attempt at reconciling facts and values by distinguishing two conceptions of the concept of “the world” in understanding thick evaluative concepts such as *cruel* and *kind*: the world as it is *anyway* (the world of primary qualities, roughly) and the values-involving world as it is *for* us. As such, we may view it as a historical precursor to other well-known companions in guilt arguments for moral objectivism from response-dependent properties.

The important point here is the implicit claim that judgements about moral salience in concept application are indeed a mystery, *except* from what one might call the moral point of view of those who are already embedded or initiated in the relevant moral practice. Mackie, admittedly in a different dialectical context to Searle, anticipates this move and

distinguishes *describing* the normative requirements of a given social or institutional practice from the “outside” by specifying what agents engaging in the institution are thereby committed to, and speaking from or “within” the social practice as a participant. Thus understood, moral requirements are akin to the rules of chess and other finite games; as he describes some such conceptual inferential rules, “‘You must not move that rook (because this would leave your king in check)’ or ‘Jones ought to pay Smith five dollars (because he promised to do so)’” (Mackie, 1977: 67).

On contemporary non-reductive moral realist versions of this claim beyond Williams’ internal realism, the “new” non-naturalism, as it were, thick evaluative concepts are (non-Platonically) *inherently evaluative*. This view of thick concepts points to a vision of moral experience of the human world such that quite ordinary “facts” about everyday situations are *laden* with meaning or salience in moral thought and language. As McDowell once put it, “[w]e do not fully understand a virtuous person’s actions – *we do not see the consistency in them* – unless we [have] a grasp of his conception of how to live (McDowell, 1979: 346, my emphasis).

As noted by Cowie and Rowland in their Introduction of this volume, this development was prefigured by seminal work on the normativity of meaning implicit in McDowell’s remarks about “consistency” quoted above. Consider again Mackie’s response to Searle’s argument:

...Searle’s main reply to his critics is a protest against the ‘anthropological attitude’, that is, against the use of the distinction on which I have relied between speaking outside and speaking within the institution. He argues that if we rely on such a distinction here, we must, for consistency, do so with regard to all parts of language, and this would undermine the validity of arguments on all topics, not just his. But this is not so. Words like ‘promise’ [...], as used within their respective institutions, have a peculiar logical feature not shared by most parts of language. (Mackie, 1977: 71).

Let us assume as uncontroversial the claim that promises entail moral obligations “within” the institution, such that promisors have a moral obligation to intend to do as they promise. The deeper issue is the related semantic claim that the entailment holds as a matter of metaphysical, normative or conceptual truth. Mackie’s response to Searle can be seen as an attempt at undermining the genuineness of what Christopher Cowie (2018) calls ‘the

costliness claim' of companions in guilt arguments. This the requirement that the argument in the moral domain *over-generalises* in ways so costly as to undermine its soundness. The problem for the companions in guilt argument from thick evaluative concepts is as follows. In general (and here I side with Pekka Väyrynen, 2014) *either* the relevant notion of shapelessness about institutional concepts isn't characteristic of the evaluative in particular (maybe it holds for mental concepts and properties as well?), in which case it is not clear why the thesis should carry the sorts of distinctive metaethical implications that get attributed to it. *Or* else the relevant notion of shapelessness (proper) is supposed to be characteristic of the evaluative in particular (*contra* Crary (2007), for instance), in which case it will be a problem for the inherent value thesis if shapelessness can be explained on the basis of more general factors about normative language. (Väyrynen, 2014; reference to Crary mine)

4. Murdoch on G.E. Moore and 'linguistic philosophy'

The upshot from the discussion thus far suggests that something stronger than conceptual competence is required for the identification of moral distinctions as such. That also seems to the position of Murdoch, who argues that we instead understand ordinary moral language relationally in terms of **loving attention**. As Murdoch puts her point in a discussion of moral attention in the work of Simone Weil,

We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being; it is through an enriching and deepening of concepts that moral progress takes place [...] We need a new vocabulary of attention. (Murdoch, 1997c ['Against Dryness']: 293)

I will return to Murdoch's implied relational concepts of attunement and loving attention below (Section 5). As we shall see, the emphasis on the idea of textured *attention* in understanding moral concepts presents a different starting point in understanding value experience compared to the familiar discussions of the normativity of meaning in the wake of Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations in the subjective realist tradition (see McDowell, *passim*). First, however, we need to get clearer about Murdoch's vision of *language* in relation to irrealist authors like Mackie and Hare.

In a chapter entitled 'Ethics and Metaphysics' in her *Existentialists and Mystics*, Murdoch discusses the analytic empiricist tendencies in moral methodology, a trend that

she traces back to Moore's linguistic approach to ethics. In separating the question of what things are good from what the word 'good' means (a term Moore himself held was indefinable), Murdoch argues that Moore paved the way for the modern philosophical tradition of her times as one of transforming the question of goodness into a question of analysing the human activity of *valuing* (or 'commanding'). The modern philosopher, Murdoch laments in her essay 'Metaphysics and Ethics', 'is no longer able to speak of the Good as something real and transcendent, but to analyse the familiar human activity of endowing things with value' (Murdoch, 1997: 60). She writes:

The simplest moral words ('good' and 'right') are selected for analysis, their meaning divided into a descriptive and an evaluative part, their descriptive part representing the factual criteria, the evaluative part representing a recommendation. And once the largely empirical disagreement about the application of principles and classifications of cases have been cleared up, ultimate differences will show up as differences of choice and recommendation in a common world of facts. What the modern moral philosopher has always done is what metaphysicians of the past have always done. He has produced a model. Only that it is not a model of any morality whatsoever. It is a model of its own morality. (Murdoch, 1997: 67).

Murdoch was before her time in tracing what, in the debate over thick evaluative concepts in the 1980s and 90s became known as the 'disentanglement manoeuvre' (McDowell), to the linguistic philosophy of G.E. Moore. (For instance, it anticipates Elstein and Hurka's (2009) point that while non-cognitivism about thick concepts requires a two-component factoring out approach to such concepts, it is also open to what they call 'Moorean cognitivists'. Her objection to the linguistic approach in modern moral philosophy as "a model of its own morality" is two-fold. First, the empirical approach of the linguistic method obscures how real interpersonal moral discourse among people, thus understood as our ordinary ways with words from historically contingent and potentially conflicting life-worlds, gets a footing in the world. Second, Murdoch argues that the very definition of the topic of understanding what it *is* for judgements to deploy evaluative concepts as an "empirical" project in linguistic philosophy excludes from the start the possibility of such judgements being world-involving and truth evaluable.

Murdoch identifies her contemporary Hare's universal prescriptivism as a paradigmatic champion of the linguistic approach, and suggests that we distinguish three types of argument on which this view might be said to rest,

...*first*, a general critical argument, to the effect that there are no metaphysical entities, *second*, a special critical argument to the effect that even if there were, we could not base an analysis on morality on them since it is impossible to argue from *is* to *ought*, from facts to value. *Third*, there are arguments, involving an appeal to our experience of morality, which support the various details of the analysis – the notion of guiding a choice, arguing referring to facts, judging a man by his conduct, and so on. (Murdoch, 1997: 63.)

Murdoch identifies the first strand of the target view 'anti-metaphysical' and dubs the second argument surrounding facts and values 'anti-naturalistic' and 'logical' in character. The universal prescriptivist's appeal to moral experience, in turn, is seen as 'empirical', 'behaviouristic' and 'non-conceptual' (Murdoch, 1997: 63).

It is worth pausing to reflect on what Murdoch should mean by 'valuing' here. On the face of it, there seems to be a conflation between value itself and the subjective conditions for valuation. As I have argued elsewhere, it is one thing to say that value-sensitive creatures set themselves ends or purposes; it is quite another thing to say that how agents set values as their ends or goals in the course of deliberation about what to do determines what *makes* something a value. (Bergqvist 2018a) The conflation, as Korsgaard (1983) pointed out, is to run together two separate distinctions: value 'for its own sake' versus 'instrumental' value; and 'intrinsic' versus 'extrinsic' value. The intrinsic/extrinsic distinction applies to values and what *makes* something a value; the latter applies to how agents set values as their ends or goals in the course of deliberation about what to do. This is open to *complementing* the account of value in ways compatible with Murdoch's moral realism.

Murdoch stays neutral on the further issue of what such a larger transcendent structure of reality might be (she mentions as options 'a religious structure, or a social or historical one' (Murdoch, 1997: 65). Her view on the concept of goodness is firmly realist in as much as the moral experience of goodness in historically situated moral agents is a matter of seeing things aright. As she puts it in her later essay 'The Idea of Perfection', goodness is 'a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just

discernment and exploration of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one's eyes but of a certain perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline' (Murdoch, 1997: 330). We have already the comparison with versions of subjective realism. In what follows I will focus on an alternative strategy based on the notion of situated representation (of a certain sort).

Following Murdoch's notion of moral experience being revelatory of value, we may understand objectivity in ethics as a matter of a judgement's revealing some aspect of the world to us, as opposed to some requirement of intersubjective convergence among ideal deliberators (recall Murdoch's dismissive remarks about "empirical disagreement about the application of principles and classifications of cases" above). For the purposes of my argument here, I will understand Murdoch's notion of a judgement's being world disclosing as neutral between those in the companions in guilt literature like Terrence Cuneo (2001) who take moral realism to require that moral properties be mind-independent and those like McDowell (1985) for whom moral judgements can be objective even if moral properties are response-dependent (see Campbell 2017 for further discussion of such neutrality in companions in guilt arguments).

What I want to stress now is just how much of Murdoch's stance on moral experience as world-involving depends on the question of language. While Murdoch passionately dismisses the "linguistic method", the distinctive character of her positive narrative approach to morality mirrors the analytic origin of a descriptive rather than prescriptive methodology of ordinary language philosophy found Hilary Putnam's image of the "face" of meaning in what he calls our 'natural cognitive relations with the world' (Putnam, 1999: 69). In inviting us to reflect on the human world in the reductive empiricist manner that she identifies not only in specific positions (she discusses logical positivism, verificationism emotivism and prescriptivism at length) but as an impoverished predicament of us moderns in general, Murdoch wants to lay plain a certain form of conceptual loss that obscures the richly textured and subtly coloured character of language (Diamond, 1988: 262-263).

Speaking in the first-person plural about the predicaments of us moderns as inheritors of an overly atomistic picture of moral agency, Murdoch laments a general 'loss of concepts' that such arguments leave behind. She writes:

What have we lost here? And what have we perhaps never had? We have suffered a general loss of concepts, the loss of a moral and political vocabulary. We no

longer use a spread-out substantial picture of the manifold virtues of man and society. We no longer see man against a background of values, of realities, which transcend him. We picture man as a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world. What we have never had, of course, is a satisfactory Liberal theory of personality, a theory of man as free and separate and **related** to a rich and complicated world from which, as a moral being, he has much to learn. We have bought the Liberal theory as it stands, because we have wished to encourage people to think for themselves as free, at the cost of surrendering the background. (Murdoch, 1997c [‘Against Dryness’]: 290)

While Murdoch’s target is a certain type of philosophical blindness that she identifies in Hare’s position, she also seeks to make plain a general predicament that besets philosophers who fail to see her *alternative* vision of world-involving and others-implying concepts. She writes:

These [empiricist] arguments only prove that we cannot picture morality as issuing from a *philosophically established* transcendent background, or from a factual background. But this is not yet to say that the notion of *belief* in the transcendent can have no place in a philosophical account of morality.” (Murdoch, 1997: 65).

Such is the threat that Murdoch envisages in the reductive analytic project of separating the question of the meaning of ‘good’ from larger world-implying transcendent structures of moral speech and speakers: ‘you cannot attach morality to the substance of the world’ (p. 65). As Niklas Forsberg (2018) puts it, ‘*if*, Murdoch contends, we imagine language as something that exists apart from, and can be understood fully without, values and evaluations, *then* we will misunderstand not only language, but also, and importantly, ethics and the human condition quite generally’ (Forsberg, 2018: 112).

Let me turn now to other sources of difficulty in situating Murdoch’s position on language and thick concepts. One is the view of **moral experience** as detached and overly individualistic that Murdoch argues underlies the confusion in modern moral philosophy. She sees it as providing a distorted and superficial view of the moral self that leads to a separation between the *style* of argumentation and the significance of the historical moral self in agency that the modern philosophy of perception has rendered invisible. Thus, as

Diamond (1988) puts it, ‘acceptance or rejection of such a philosophy of mind must profoundly affect the way in which one evaluates shifts in vocabulary and mode of thought.’ (Diamond 1988: 271). Murdoch writes:

We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but “benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy. Our current picture of freedom encourages a dream-like facility; whereas what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of moral life and the opacity of persons. We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being; it is through an enriching and deepening of concepts that moral progress takes place. Simone Weil said that morality was a matter of attention, not of will. We need a new vocabulary of attention.’ (Murdoch, 1996c ‘Against Dryness’: 293).

Murdoch argues for this conclusion at length by her well-known example of a mother who comes to see her daughter-in-law in a new light as ‘refreshingly spontaneous’ (rather than juvenile and vulgar) through an active and conscientious effort to *attend* to the girl and see her ‘as she really is’. What we have here is not just the reminder of the importance of keeping one’s mind open so that one does not overlook some interesting *alternative* ways of representing the circumstances. The claim is rather that you are morally required to adopt a critical stance because you could otherwise miss those morally salient aspects that could actually make a difference to the appropriateness of one’s practical response.

As I read her, it is because Murdoch understands art and morals as requiring undistorted vision and continuous critical attention to commonly articulated concepts and familiar problems that she links them with love. This, as we shall see, also serves as a corrective to an overly atomistic picture of the moral situation of the person and the moral activity of thinking itself that drives Murdoch’s interest in a different picture of moral agency to that of the ‘choice and argument’ (*VC*M: 81) model of moral discourse, and the metaphor of vision itself.

5. From Companions in Concepts to Companions in Love

A familiar story we are told about Murdoch’s account of moral attention is a criticism of philosophy’s lack of attention to the role of ‘inner’ moral activity in life. While this story is

well known, there is another dimension to her emphasis on the *struggle to see* that I find particularly helpful in understanding her moral realism. It is the reminder that unless one acknowledges, precisely, the social dimension of the ‘inner life’ in self-examination, there is also limited scope for perfection and self-transformation. Murdoch writes:

The enemies of art and of morals, the enemies that is of love, are the same: social convention and neurosis. One may fail to see the individual ... because we are ourselves sunk in a social whole which we allow uncritically to determine our reactions, or because we see each other exclusively as so determined. Or we may fail to see the individual because we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own into which we try to draw things from the outside, not grasping their reality and independence, making them into dream objects of our own.

(SG: 216)

Murdoch contrasts ‘fantasy’ with ethical imagination and argues that we are partially complicit in our own conceptions of what the world is like. It is this predicament of being partly hidden from ourselves in social convention that raises the issue of responsibility in the *struggle to see* the world: what is needed is a certain critical orientation that goes with self-appraisal of a kind that can be both realistic and continuous. As she puts it in her essay ‘The Darkness of Practical Reason’ in *Existentialists and Mystics*, we are partly obscured in vision ‘because the world we see already contains our values and we may not be aware of the slow delicate process of imagination and will which have put those values there’ (Murdoch, 1997b: 200). In contrast to ‘fantasy’ (and ‘neurosis’), Murdoch speaks of imagination as the ‘*effortful* ability to see what lies before one more clearly, more justly, to consider new possibilities’ (MGM: 322, my emphasis). On this view, ‘Imagination is a kind of freedom, a renewed ability to perceive and express the truth’ (E&M: 255). As Murdoch expresses it in her 1967 *Leslie Stephen Lecture*:

The area of morals, and ergo of moral philosophy, can ... be seen ... as covering *the whole of our mode of living* and the *quality of our relations with the world*. (Murdoch, 1967 SG: 97).

While this aspect of Murdoch’s position, that adequate moral ‘vision’ may itself constitute a form of moral knowledge, has been much discussed in the literature, I want to explore a different aspect of the notion of perception in the application of concepts that is not limited (and restricted) to creating conditions for morally right action. The claim is that

attention is *difficult* because, and insofar as, we are partially *complicit* in our own conceptions of what the world is like.

What distinguishes Murdoch's model of moral agency from other influential Neo-Aristotelian accounts of moral vision framed as *phronesis* (see McDowell 1998) or rational norms (see Setiya 2013) is its emphasis on the theme of love; as Murdoch puts it in her essay 'On "God" and "Good"' (later published in *The Sovereignty of Good*), 'we need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central' (SG: 45). Murdoch's concern is this. Once we recognise the perspectival nature of moral vision as always originating from within the socio-historical framework or vision of individuals, we must also acknowledge that *conceptions* of shared concepts in public language are themselves parochial. Thus, as Broackes (2012a) notes, 'our conception of love—or of courage or repentance (IP 29/322, 26/320)—will vary with age and experience; and our deepest and most revelatory experiences may, in a fairly ordinary sense, be remarkably private.' (Broackes, 2012a: 13) Now, there are many sides to the notion of 'privacy' in Murdoch's work, but what matters here is the undeniable centrality of *outward-looking* attention in Murdoch's account of self-cultivation and, in particular, its role for her discussion of difficulty of moral vision in relating to the reality of others, and the metaphor of 'vision' itself. A second noteworthy feature of Murdoch's account, which I hold is also present in the emphasis on our relationality in the quotation above, is the operation of a multiplicity of perspectives in creating opportunities for self-cultivation. The explorative process of rediscovery, which I have elsewhere argued (Bergqvist 2018b) is helpfully understood as moral self-development, crucially turns on adopting what Peter Goldie (2012) calls an outside 'double-perspective', an open-ended mirroring between the self and others. As Ronald de Sousa puts it, in order to understand the *reality* of other persons (and ourselves) 'we need to empathise with the subject's first-person perspective, and we need to assess, from an outside point of view, the appropriateness of that that person's judgement'—whilst yet bearing in mind that I might be mistaken or self-deceived at any of these points in representing the relevant circumstances to myself. de Sousa 2016: 148).

I have argued elsewhere (2018a; 2018b) that Murdoch's elaboration of the notion of love in moral agency as a continuous 'deepening' is not restricted to the familiar Neo-Aristotelian idea of moral vision as a form of rational awareness of the shape and moral significance of one's situation (see McDowell 1998); Dancy 2004, Setiya 2013). Nor, I maintain, does Murdoch's development of Weil's idea of attention reduce down to what

Velleman (1999) describes as a Kantian-like respectful recognition of autonomy or rational agency of others as such. Rather, Murdoch's notion of love requires moral attentiveness to the reality of *particular* others, and the self, in an essentially relational way as historical persons. She writes:

M's activity is peculiarly her own. Its details are the details of this personality; and partly for this reason it may well be an activity which can only be performed privately. M could not *do this* thing in conversation with any other person.

(IP: 22/317)

What Murdoch seems to be saying here about the 'difficulty' of understanding and self-cultivation in moral vision is that, in order to understand whether M's reappraisal of D truly constitutes an *appraisal* of D 'for who she really is' as opposed to projective distortion, for instance, we need to know more about M's *personality* as a particular historical individual. This is a radical claim. As Hopwood puts it, 'the question is not so much "is D really noisy or is she really gay?" but rather, "what does it mean *for M specifically* to call D noisy (or gay)?"' (Hopwood, 2017: In Press).⁵ This, if I am right, is yet another reminder that unless one acknowledges, precisely, the social dimension of the 'inner life' in self-examination, what D means *to M* specifically as *her* daughter-in-law, there is only limited scope for perfection and self-cultivation in concept application.

Murdoch's emphasis on relational moral personality and attunement in self-development in her urge for "more concepts" paint a rich and textured picture of our different ways with words in ordinary moral life. My new argument here examines the wider implications of this emphasis on relational moral personality in creating opportunities for self-cultivation in concept application as a claim about the normative grounding of concepts.

I maintain that Murdoch's rejection of an overly atomistic picture of the self in favour a relational model of moral vision and self-cultivation mirrors Murdoch's wider position on language and, in particular, her emphasis on the role of the parochial in attending to differences in *conceptions* of shared concepts in public language; what the daughter-in-law D means *to the mother M* specifically as *her* daughter-in-law. Murdoch offers a comparison with art criticism to emphasise this point in a way that also speaks to the social dimension of the 'privacy' of the inner life as a condition for realistic and continuous self-examination that I alluded to above:

If a critic tells us that a picture has ‘functional colour’ or ‘significant form’ we need to know not only the picture but also something about his general theory in order to understand the remark. Similarly, if M says D is ‘common’, although the term does not belong to a technical vocabulary, this use of it can only be fully understood if we know not only D but [also] M.

(IP: 32/325)

So, what then, is it that a competent user of concepts knows on this view? A common story that we find in Murdoch scholarship (e.g. Diamond 1982; Bergqvist 2018b) is that Murdoch’s call for “more concepts” in moral life emerges from a distinctively Wittgensteinian model of practical rationality, a model of attunement or sensitivity to the world grounded in what Stanley Cavell (1969: 52, 1979, *passim*) referred to as the ‘whirl of organism’ immanent in our experience as reasonable and mature moral agents who, as such, can be held accountable for what we say and what we do. On this view, the sources of normativity come, not from independent rules of application that are external to the relevant conceptual practice, but from other people. This presents us with a powerful alternative to the romanticised caricature of moral agency that figures in Murdoch’s criticism of the linguistic philosophy of her times. To borrow a helpful image from Richard Moran, part of the problem in creating opportunities for self-cultivation in concept application is that ‘the *fate* of situatedness as such is not escapable’ (Moran 2012: 190). And yet, returning to the perceived difficulty of loving attention, responsibility, we must at the same time recognise that individual thought and judgement is not thereby confined to commonly articulated concepts and familiar ideas in line with the default social conventions of one’s moral situation.

Given that Cavell’s work plays an important role in McDowell’s (1995, 1998) Neo-Aristotelian framing of virtuous moral agency as practical rationality in the application of and competence with general concepts, it is worth noting some finer nuances in Murdoch’s position on language. Each in their different way, Cavell and McDowell both stress the philosophical importance of “the ordinary” in understanding the normativity of meaning. The central claim is that the normative authority and philosophical authenticity of the voice of “our ordinary” experience and confidence with words in relating to the world and others is only audible *from within* everyday life. While I believe Murdoch would agree with the spirit of such an account of the normativity of meaning, I also maintain that her distinctive emphasis on the operation of a *multiplicity* of perspectives in ordinary language raises a concern about the implicit “we” against this background.⁶ The reason for this is

simple: there is no *single* “voice” of the ordinary lived experience (for further discussion of this issue in Cavell, see Overgaard 2010) Therefore, assuming that not every such “ordinary voice” (including one’s own) is reliable, if we want a philosophical tool for capturing the significance of ordinary experience in understanding morality (beyond its literary expression in art and fiction), what is needed is precisely a critical stance to the many background structures that subtly influence what we see in social conventions.

If my suggestion that Murdoch’s relational approach to morality would urge suspicion of the notion of “the ordinary” as what “we” believe and experience in life ordinary language philosophy is correct, this may also serve to partly explain Murdoch’s sweeping criticism of ordinary language philosophy. As we have seen (Section 4), Murdoch distances herself from what she calls “linguistic philosophy” and other writers in the so-called ordinary language tradition in her writings due to her general suspicion of the dry ‘behaviourist’, ‘logical’ and ‘anti-naturalist’ empiricist tendencies of the linguistic philosophy of her times. Her central critique of Hare can be seen as a general philosophical plea for “more concepts” against this background; it is one of *reminding* readers of the diversity and complexity of “ordinary” lived experience in the many relationships that, for Murdoch, ground moral distinctions.

In this regard, despite her many derogatory remarks about ‘linguistic philosophy’, Murdoch’s own use of ordinary language and the richness of moral experience as indispensable tools for moral philosophy in the elucidation of moral vision as *revelatory* of value can be brought into sharper focus by comparison with Wittgenstein’s (1963) idea of a ‘perspicuous representation’ as being a key aspect of the task of philosophy as he sees it: offering a model of comparison that ‘earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things’ (*PI* §122) in order to achieve a ‘clear view’ of that which is troubling us (*PI* §133). However this does not mean that there is some single philosophical method through which this is achieved. On the contrary, Wittgenstein presents the philosopher with an *open-ended* range of conceptual tools and techniques that can be used in a variety of different ways including (but not limited to): offering ‘objects of comparison’ and presenting ‘alternative pictures’; pointing out particular ‘family resemblances’ and ‘neglected aspects’ of our language; grammatical analysis of our use of language in practice, and so on. The real task at hand is to discern which method available to one is the most *pointful* in each context of critical appraisal for attaining clarity and reveal meaning – to which “*whatever it takes*” would be the only answer to give in the abstract. What Murdoch’s emphasis on relational moral personality adds to this picture is the importance

of the further proviso that the very concept of some method being *pointful* (or not) will itself depend on what conceptions of shared concepts are operative between the speakers under consideration that implies their personality; what it would mean *for M specifically* to call D gay and lively in reappraising her moral personality in a loving way. What characterises such a stance?

As I read her, there are two parts to the implicit corollary that there ‘is no outside’ in continuous self-cultivation in the application of shared concepts. The first claim is an epistemic ‘no priority’ claim about knowledge in intersubjective relating, such that neither perspective of the parties involved is prioritised over the other. The second claim is a claim about the meaning of individual concepts as a function of the wider interpersonal systems in which they operate (in ordinary language and beyond). Framed in this way, my concept of attunement may also serve to elucidate an aspect of Murdoch’s concern that ‘neurosis and social conversion’ (SG: 216) subtly structure our conceptions of shared concepts. On the alternative view, the ability to communicate across differences in entrenched conceptual schemes that are inevitably operative in interpersonal encounters in an open-ended way can perhaps be described as ‘ethical’ achievement because it serves as a crucial corrective of being overly committed to “*the voice*” of the prevailing norms and ways of seeing the world.

Acknowledging qualities of an historical individual as part of the wider practical context of a person’s life *as* the person they are, in turn, is an important aspect of the first-personal sense of being understood—of being visible and present to the other *as* me. Determining which of the many perspectives that is operative in isolation from an individual’s wider systems of meaning not only fails to acknowledge the reality of another life-world, but in ignoring the shape of individual worldviews, an important aspect of the first-personal sense of the object’s status of *being understood as a person* may also be undermined. This, I maintain is also an important lesson to be drawn from Murdoch’s account of the moral significance of language as loving attunement.

6. Concluding Remarks

Much contemporary work in metaethics makes heavy use of tools from philosophy of language and linguistics in understanding how our actual use of normative and evaluative terms work (see, e.g., Wedgwood (2001) conceptual role semantics for moral terms). What the revival of the error theory in metaethics brings into view is the semantic and

metaphysical significance of this development; behind the concern that our actual normative and evaluative terms might systematically fail to ascribe corresponding normative and evaluative properties is the age-old challenge of how (moral) thought gets a footing in the world. More precisely, the threat is that our actual moral language does not reliably and systematically *track* corresponding moral properties. Indeed, Ralph Wedgwood (2001) holds that we ‘should reject the very idea of moral properties’ if what he terms ‘the semantics of moral terms’ is shown to come down in favour of emotivism (2001: 3). Assuming, with the error theorist, that the *surface* grammar of actual moral language is precisely not non-cognitive in character, in making this assertion Wedgwood describes how some possible moral vocabulary works. This is not an uncommon view. Indeed, as Matti Eklund (2017) notes, when Moore discussed the unanalyzability of ‘good’, he too talked about how some *possible* moral discourse could work. (Eklund, 2017: 197) Murdoch, in contrast, anchors the moral concepts firmly in the texture of interpersonal relationships between historically situated moral agents.

The central difference between Murdoch’s position on language and the linguistic accounts of normative language it is situated against is precisely this: even if these other accounts do describe alternative possible languages, Murdoch holds that the existence of such possible languages does not *as such* pose a threat to the normative authority and philosophical authenticity of the voice of the multifaced “voice” of experience in ordinary moral life. On this view, what Eklund classes as ‘the question which language we ought to use’ (Eklund 2018: 197) does not arise. Or, better, to the extent that the question of “which language” to use *does* arise, this will be due to first-order moral and political reasons about what concepts in public moral discourse are appropriate and not appropriate, claims about wider systems of meaning adduced between the speakers as historically situated moral agents within; it will not be due to philosophical considerations about what an adequate theory of *actual normative language* in philosophy of language amounts to.

But what is the analogue conception of *value* that this new way of seeing the matter of meaning brings with it? On my account, the property of being attuned to a human perspective has to do with the nature of value rather than the nature of evaluative thought or experience. It is worth pausing to note the difference between this reading of Murdoch’s claim that worldviews can reveal value and an alternative epistemic construal whereby the perspectivalness of value thesis is defined as a feature of Murdochian moral vision. If the central notion of perspective were understood as epistemic in this way, the resulting account of moral vision would trivially rule out Platonism (since moral vision and

Platonism would just be defined in incompatible ways.)⁷ By contrast, my impression is that some value is non-perspectival just in case it does not depend on human perspectives and worldviews for its existence. To illustrate, if value were non-perspectival, then vision of value would be analogous to vision of objects such as, say, pine trees (e.g., a Scots pine). Pine trees don't depend on human perspectives or worldviews for their existence, although our human sensibilities are capable of perceiving them.

So far, I have sought to show that we can make sense of Murdoch's claim that worldviews can reveal value without committing ourselves either to Platonism or anthropocentrism. The suggestion was that moral vision puts pressure on us to have a conception of value according to which what is valuable is not valuable *from the point of view of the universe* but valuable *for us*. Although moral vision on its own is largely neutral to the question of the nature of value, my position is that Murdoch's notion of the concept ultimately fits best with a conception of value that is in some sense perspectival rather than Platonic. This raises a number of meta-philosophical questions concerning the relation between moral vision and the notion of non-perspectival value with which we started.

If the notion of non-perspectival value is better understood in metaphysical terms, does it not follow that the concept of *perspectival* value is value that *does* metaphysically depend on human perspectives and worldviews for its existence? No. We can talk of perspectival value in different ways. It might mean that value is fixed by our *actual* perspectives and worldviews, whatever those happen to be. This would lead to a highly subjectivist picture. But there is space for an alternative view. The alternative says that value would not exist but for creatures with perspectives and worldviews, but *actual* perspectives and worldviews can be mistaken. Such perspectival value is *for us*, and we can be better or worse at detecting it in realistic and continuous self-cultivation in concept application as a relational and historically situated endeavour.

This, I conclude, is the main lesson we may draw from Iris Murdoch's account of the moral significance of language as loving attunement in securing thought's footing in the world.⁸

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¹ This paper is due to appear in Christopher Cowie and Richard Rowland (eds.), *Companions in Guilt Arguments in Metaethics*, presently under contract with Routledge.

² It does not matter for the purposes of introduction what is the precise relationship between predicates and concepts: I will use 'term' to stay neutral on this metaphysical issue for the moment.

³ My own work on moral perception, for instance, implicitly assumes Putnam's (2002) insight that such openness can improve understanding of the target concept (*evaluative perception*) in light of our understanding of arguments from other specific "sub-fields" of philosophy – such as discussions of 'high-level content' and 'theory-ladenness of experience' in philosophy of perception and epistemology (see Bergqvist 2018a). Elsewhere I have developed specific new arguments for 'particularism' in aesthetics by

analogy with specific arguments surrounding ‘holism about reasons’ in the domain of ethics (Bergqvist, 2010)

⁴ Murdoch’s book *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* will henceforth be abbreviated ‘MGM’. ‘IP’ stands for the essay ‘The Idea of Perception’. ‘OGG’ stands for the essay ‘On “God” and “Good”’. ‘SGC’ stands for the essay ‘The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts’ (‘SGC’) For the three essays (IP, OGG, SGC) that make up the collection *The Sovereignty of Good*, page references are given both to 1970 Penguin volume with the same name, abbreviated ‘SG’, and, where possible, to the reprints in the 1997 volume *Existentialists and Mystics*, abbreviated ‘E&M’. ‘SBR’ refers to the 1959 essay ‘The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited’, which is also reprinted in the 1997 *E&M* volume; ‘VCM’ refers to her 1956 ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’.

⁵ Hopwood (2017) frames the problem of classifying particulars under universal concepts as one of finding the right ‘description’ but the implicit notion of thick description is not really explained; rather the central topic of the sections in Murdoch that interests us both appears to be the need for imagination and constant critical self-appraisal in relating to the world and others in a personal way.

⁶ In a discussion of perfectionism, Cavell 1991 distances his preferred ‘Emersonian perfectionism’ from what he understands Murdoch’s moral perfectionism to be. I maintain Cavell misunderstands Murdoch’s position because he overlooks the centrality theme of love and relationality but I cannot defend that claim here.

⁷ I thank Michael Milona for this observation.

⁸ This paper is dedicated to the bright, loving memory of Rosalyne Ewart.

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